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LONDON

A BOOK OF ASPECTS

ARTHUR SYMONS

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To Mrs James R. Smith

with Flowers and

Love, Good-by, with

the Kind regards

of

Edmund L. Burke

March 2nd 1911

LONDON

A BOOK OF ASPECTS

LONDON

A BOOK OF ASPECTS

BY

ARTHUR SYMONS

LONDON: PRIVATELY PRINTED FOR
EDMUND D. BROOKS AND HIS FRIENDS
MINNEAPOLIS
1909

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Les idées sont dans l'air, elles vous sourient au coin d'une rue, elles s'élancent sous une roue de cabriolet avec un jet de boue.

Balzac.

LONDON: A BOOK OF ASPECTS

I

THERE is in the aspect of London a certain magnificence: the magnificence of weight, solidity, energy, imperturbability, and an unconquered continuance. It is alive from border to border, not an inch of it is not alive. It exists, goes on, and has been going on for so many centuries. Here and there a stone or the line of a causeway fixes a date. If you look beyond it you look into fog. It sums up and includes England. Materially England is contained in it, and the soul of England has always inhabited it as a body. We have not had a great man who has never lived in London.

And London makes no display; it is there, as it has come, as fire and plagues have left it; but it has never had either a Haussmann or a Nero. It has none of the straight lines of Paris nor the tall lines of Vienna nor the emphatic

German monotony. It has not the natural aids of Constantinople, with seas and continents about it, nor of Rome, with its seven hills, and its traces of all the history of the world. It was set in fertile soil, which has still left it the marvellous green grass of its parks, and on a river which has brought beauty along its whole course. Great architects have left a few unspoilt treasures: Westminster Abbey, the Banqueting Hall at Whitehall, an old church here and there. But for the most part the appeal of London is made by no beauty or effect in things themselves, but by the sense which it gives us of inevitable growth and impregnable strength, and by the atmosphere which makes and unmakes this vast and solid city every morning and every evening with a natural magic peculiar to it.

English air, working upon London smoke, creates the real London. The real London is not a city of uniform brightness, like Paris, nor of savage gloom, like Prague; it is a picture continually changing, a continual sequence of pictures, and there is no knowing what mean street corner may not suddenly take on a glory not its own. The English mist is always at work like a subtle painter, and London is a vast canvas prepared for the mist to work on.

The especial beauty of London is the Thames, and the Thames is so wonderful because the mist is always changing its shapes and colours, always making its lights mysterious, and building palaces of cloud out of mere Parliament Houses with their jags and turrets. When the mist collaborates with night and rain, the masterpiece is created.

Most travellers come into London across the river, sometimes crossing it twice. The entrance, as you leave the country behind you, is ominous. If you come by night, and it is never wise to enter any city except by night, you are slowly swallowed up by a blank of blackness, pierced by holes and windows of dingy light; foul and misty eyes of light in the sky; narrow gulfs, in which lights blink; blocks and spikes of black against grey; masts, as it were, rising out of a sea of mist; then a whole street suddenly laid bare in bright light; shoulders of dark buildings; and then black shiny rails, and then the river, a vast smudge, dismal and tragic; and, as one crosses it again, between the vast network of the bridge's bars, the impossible fairy peep-show of the Embankment.

All this one sees in passing, in hardly more than a series of flashes; but if you would see

London steadily from the point where its aspect is finest, go on a night when there has been rain to the footpath which crosses Hungerford Bridge by the side of the railway-track. The river seems to have suddenly become a lake; under the black arches of Waterloo Bridge there are reflections of golden fire, multiplying arch beyond arch, in a lovely tangle. The Surrey side is dark, with tall vague buildings rising out of the mud on which a little water crawls: is it the water that moves or the shadows? A few empty barges or steamers lie in solid patches on the water near the bank; and a stationary sky-sign, hideous where it defaces the night, turns in the water to wavering bars of rosy orange. The buildings on the Embankment rise up, walls of soft greyness with squares of lighted windows, which make patterns across them. They tremble in the mist, their shapes flicker; it seems as if a breath would blow out their lights and leave them bodiless husks in the wind. From one of the tallest chimneys a reddish smoke floats and twists like a flag. Below, the Embankment curves towards Cleopatra's Needle: you see the curve of the wall, as the lamps light it, leaving the obelisk in shadow, and falling faintly on the grey mud in the river. Just that

corner has a mysterious air, as if secluded, in the heart of a pageant; I know not what makes it quite so tragic and melancholy. The aspect of the night, the aspect of London, pricked out in points of fire against an enveloping darkness, is as beautiful as any sunset or any mountain; I do not know any more beautiful aspect. And here, as always in London, it is the atmosphere that makes the picture, an atmosphere like Turner, revealing every form through the ecstasy of its colour.

It is not only on the river that London can make absolute beauty out of the material which lies so casually about in its streets. A London sunset, seen through vistas of narrow streets, has a colour of smoky rose which can be seen in no other city, and it weaves strange splendours, often enough, on its edges and gulfs of sky, not less marvellous than Venice can lift over the Giudecca, or Siena see stretched beyond its walls. At such a point as the Marble Arch you may see conflagrations of jewels, a sky of burning lavender, tossed abroad like a crumpled cloak, with broad bands of dull purple and smoky pink, slashed with bright gold and decked with grey streamers; you see it through a veil of moving mist, which darkens downwards to a solid block, coloured like lead,

where the lighted road turns, meeting the sky.

And there are a few open spaces, which at all times and under all lights are satisfying to the eyes. Hyde Park Corner, for no reason in particular, gives one the first sensation of pleasure as one comes into London from Victoria Station. The glimpse of the two parks, with their big gates, the eager flow of traffic, not too tangled or laborious just there, the beginning of Piccadilly, the lack of stiffness in anything: is it these that help to make up the impression? Piccadilly Circus is always like a queer hive, and is at least never dead or formal. But it is Trafalgar Square which is the conscious heart or centre of London.

If the Thames is the soul of London, and if the parks are its eyes, surely Trafalgar Square may well be reckoned its heart. There is no hour of day or night when it is not admirable, but for my part I prefer the evening, just as it grows dusk, after a day of heavy rain. How often have I walked up and down, for mere pleasure, for a pleasure which quickened into actual excitement, on that broad, curved platform from which you can turn to look up at the National Gallery, like a frontispiece, and from which you can look down over the dark

stone pavement, black and shining with rain, on which the curved fountains stand with their inky water, while two gas-lamps cast a feeble light on the granite base of the Nelson monument and on the vast sulky lions at the corners. The pedestal goes up straight into the sky, diminishing the roofs, which curve downwards to the white clock-face, alone visible on the clock-tower at Westminster. Whitehall flows like a river, on which vague shapes of traffic float and are submerged. The mist and the twilight hide the one harmonious building in London, the Banqueting Hall. You realize that it is there, and that beyond it are the Abbey and the river, with the few demure squares and narrow frugal streets still left standing in Westminster.

It is only after trying to prefer the parks and public gardens of most of the other capitals of Europe that I have come to convince myself that London can more than hold its own against them all. We have no site comparable with the site of the Pincio in Rome, none of the opalescent water which encircles the gardens at Venice, no Sierras to see from our Prado, not even a Berlin forest in the midst of the city; and I for one have never loved a London park as I have loved the Luxembourg

Gardens; but, if we will be frank with ourselves, and put sentiment or the prejudice of foreign travel out of our heads, we shall have to admit that in the natural properties of the park, in grass, trees, and the magic of atmosphere, London is not to be excelled.

And, above all, in freshness. After the London parks all others seem dusty and dingy. It is the English rain, and not the care of our park-keepers, that brings this gloss out of the grass and gives our public gardens their air of country freedom. Near the Round Pond you might be anywhere except in the middle of a city of smoke and noise, and it is only by an unusually high roof or chimney, somewhere against the sky, far off, that you can realize where you are. The Serpentine will never be vulgarized, though cockneys paddle on it in boats; the water in St. James's Park will always be kept wild and strange by the sea-gulls; and the toy-boats only give an infantile charm to the steel-blue water of the Round Pond. You can go astray in long avenues of trees, where, in autumn, there are always children playing among the leaves, building tombs and castles with them. In summer you can sit for a whole afternoon, undisturbed, on a chair on that green slope which goes down to the artificial end of the

Serpentine, where the stone parapets are, over the water from the peacocks. It is only the parks that make summer in London almost bearable.

I have never been able to love Regent's Park, though I know it better than the others, and though it has lovely water-birds about its islands, and though it is on the way to the Zoological Gardens. Its flowers are the best in London, for colour, form, and tending. You hear the wild beasts, but no city noises. Those sounds of roaring, crying, and the voices of imprisoned birds are sometimes distressing, and are perhaps one of the reasons why one can never be quite happy or aloof from things in Regent's Park. The water there is meagre, and the boats too closely visible; the children are poorer and seem more preoccupied than the children in the western parks. And there is the perplexing inner circle, which is as difficult to get in or out of as its lamentable namesake underground. Coming where it does, the park is a breathing-place, an immense relief; but it is the streets around, and especially the Marylebone Road, that give it its value.

There remains what is more than a park, but in its way worth them all: Hampstead Heath. There are to be trains to bring poor

people from the other end of London, philanthropic trains, but the heath will be spoilt, and it is almost the last thing left to spoil in London. Up to now, all the Saturday afternoons, the Sundays, the Bank Holidays, have hardly touched it. There are hiding-places, even on these evil days, and if one fails there is always another. And if one has the good fortune to live near it, and can come out in the middle of the night upon Judges' Walk, when the moonlight fills the hollow like a deep bowl, and silence is like that peace which passeth understanding, everything else in London will seem trivial, a mere individual thing, compared with it.

On the heath you are lifted over London, but you are in London. It is that double sense, that nearness and remoteness combined, the sight of St. Paul's from above the level of the dome, the houses about the pond in the Vale of Health, from which one gets so unparalleled a sensation. But the heath is to be loved for its own sake, for its peace, amplitude, high bright air and refreshment; for its mystery, wildness, formality; for its grassy pools and hillocks that flow and return like waves of the sea; for its green grass and the white roads chequering it; for its bracken, its mist and

bloom of trees. Every knoll and curve of it draws the feet to feel their soft shapes; one cannot walk, but must run and leap on Hampstead Heath.

II

AS you come back into London from the country, out of air into smoke, rattling level with the chimney-pots, and looking down into narrow gulfs swarming with men and machines, you are as if seized in a gigantic grip. First comes a splendid but disheartening sense of force, forcing you to admire it, then a desperate sense of helplessness. London seems a vast ant-heap, and you are one more ant dropped on the heap. You are stunned, and then you come to yourself, and your thought revolts against the material weight which is crushing you. What a huge futility it all seems, this human ant-heap, this crawling and hurrying and sweating and building and bearing burdens, and never resting all day long and never bringing any labour to an end. After the fields and the sky London seems trivial, a thing artificially made, in which people work at senseless toils, for idle and imaginary ends. Labour in the fields is regular, sane, inevitable as the labour of the

earth with its roots. You are in your place in the world, between the grass and the clouds, really alive and living as natural a life as the beasts. In London men work as if in darkness, scarcely seeing their own hands as they work, and not knowing the meaning of their labour. They wither and dwindle, forgetting or not knowing that it was ever a pleasant thing merely to be alive and in the air. They are all doing things for other people, making useless "improvements," always perfecting the achievement of material results with newly made tools. They are making things cheaper, more immediate in effect, of the latest modern make. It is all a hurry, a levelling downward, an automobilization of the mind.

And their pleasures are as their labours. In the country you have but to walk or look out of your window and you are in the midst of beautiful and living things: a tree, a dimly jewelled frog, a bird in flight. Every natural pleasure is about you: you may walk, or ride, or skate, or swim, or merely sit still and be at rest. But in London you must invent pleasures and then toil after them. The pleasures of London are more exhausting than its toils. No stone-breaker on the roads works so hard or martyrs his flesh so cruelly as the actress

or the woman of fashion. No one in London does what he wants to do, or goes where he wants to go. It is a suffering to go to any theatre, any concert. There are even people who go to lectures. And all this continual self-sacrifice is done for "amusement." It is astonishing.

London was once habitable, in spite of itself. The machines have killed it. The old, habitable London exists no longer. Charles Lamb could not live in this mechanical city, out of which everything old and human has been driven by wheels and hammers and the fluids of noise and speed. When will his affectionate phrase, "the sweet security of streets," ever be used again of London? No one will take a walk down Fleet Street any more, no one will shed tears of joy in the "motley Strand," no one will be leisurable any more, or turn over old books at a stall, or talk with friends at the street corner. Noise and evil smells have filled the streets like tunnels in daylight; it is a pain to walk in the midst of all these hurrying and clattering machines; the multitude of humanity, that "bath" into which Baudelaire loved to plunge, is scarcely discernible, it is secondary to the machines; it is only in a machine that you

can escape the machines. London that was vast and smoky and loud, now stinks and reverberates; to live in it is to live in the hollow of a clanging bell, to breathe its air is to breathe the foulness of modern progress.

London as it is now is the wreck and moral of civilization. We are more civilized every day, every day we can go more quickly and more uncomfortably wherever we want to go, we can have whatever we want brought to us more quickly and more expensively. We live by touching buttons and ringing bells, a new purely practical magic sets us in communication with the ends of the earth. We can have abominable mockeries of the arts of music and of speech whizzing in our ears out of metal mouths. We have outdone the wildest prophetic buffooneries of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, whose "celestial bill-sticking" may be seen nightly defacing the majesty of the river; here any gramophones can give us the equivalent of his "chemical analysis of the last breath." The plausible and insidious telephone aids us and intrudes upon us, taking away our liberty from us, and leaving every Englishman's house his castle no longer, but a kind of whispering gallery, open to the hum of every voice. There is hardly a street left in London where one can

talk with open windows by day and sleep with open windows by night. We are tunnelled under until our houses rock, we are shot through holes in the earth if we want to cross London; even the last liberty of Hampstead Heath is about to be taken from us by railway. London has civilized itself into the likeness of a steam roundabout at a fair; it goes clattering and turning, to the sound of a jubilant hurdy-gurdy; round and round, always on the same track, but always faster; and the children astride its wooden horses think they are getting to the world's end.

It is the machines, more than anything else, that have done it. Men and women, as they passed each other in the street or on the road, saw and took cognizance of each other, human being of human being. The creatures that we see now in the machines are hardly to be called human beings, so are they disfigured out of all recognition, in order that they may go fast enough not to see anything themselves. Does anyone any longer walk? If I walk I meet no one walking, and I cannot wonder at it, for what I meet is an uproar, and a whizz, and a leap past me, and a blinding cloud of dust, and a machine on which scarecrows perch is disappearing at the end of the road. The verbs

to loll, to lounge, to dawdle, to loiter, the verbs precious to Walt Whitman, precious to every lover of men and of himself, are losing their currency; they will be marked "o" for obsolete in the dictionaries of the future. All that poetry which Walt Whitman found in things merely because they were alive will fade out of existence like the Red Indian. It will live on for some time yet in the country where the railway has not yet smeared its poisonous trail over the soil; but in London there will soon be no need of men, there will be nothing but machines.

There was a time when it was enough merely to be alive, and to be in London. Every morning promised an adventure; something or someone might be waiting at the corner of the next street; it was difficult to stay indoors because there were so many people in the streets. I still think, after seeing most of the capitals of Europe, that there is no capital in Europe where so many beautiful women are to be seen as in London. Warsaw comes near, for rarity; not for number. The streets and the omnibuses were always alive with beauty or with something strange. In London anything may happen. "Adventures to the adventurous!" says somebody in "Contarini

Fleming." But who can look as high as the uneasy faces on a motor-omnibus, who can look under the hoods and goggles in a motor-car? The roads are too noisy now for any charm of expression to be seen on the pavements. The women are shouting to each other, straining their ears to hear. They want to get their shopping done and to get into a motor-car or a motor-omnibus.

Could another Charles Lamb create a new London?

III

HOW much of Lamb's London is left? "London itself a pantomime and a masquerade" is left, and "a mind that loves to find itself at home in crowds" is never without those streets and pavements to turn by its alchemy into pure gold. "Is any night-walk comparable," as he asks, and need not have waited for an answer, "to a walk from St. Paul's to Charing Cross, for lighting and paving, crowds going and coming without respite, the rattle of coaches and the cheerfulness of shops?" "St. Paul's Churchyard!" he cries, "the Strand! Exeter Change! Charing Cross, with the man *upon* the black horse! These are thy gods, O London!" One has to turn to the notes on the letters to find out that Exeter Change was "a great building, with bookstalls and miscellaneous stalls on the ground floor and a menagerie above." How delicious that sounds! But then "it was demolished in 1829." Temple Bar has gone, and the griffin, which

would have seemed to Lamb as permanent as London Stone. Staple Inn would have been less of an anomaly to him in "noble Holborn" than it is to us, as it stands, with an aged helplessness, not far off from the useful horrors of Holborn Viaduct, a "modern improvement" which has swept away the old timbered houses that used to make an island in the middle of the street. Like all old London, that is not hidden away in a corner, (as St. John's Gateway is, on its hill at the back of Smithfield, and St. Bartholomew's Church, which hinders nobody's passing, and the Charterhouse, which has so far held its own) they have had to make way for the traffic, that traffic which is steadily pushing down the good things that are old and shouldering up the bad new things that will be temporary. We have still, and for historic and royal reasons will always have, Westminster Abbey: the Beautiful Temple, as Lamb called it, when he was religiously occupied in "shaming the sellers out of the Temple." A church that is not in the way of a new street, or does not intrude over the edge of a new widening, is, for the most part, safe. But we, who live now, have seen Christ's Hospital, that comely home and fosterer of genius, pulled down, stone by stone,

its beautiful memory obliterated, because boys, they say, want country air. That was one of the breathing-places, the old quiet things, that helped to make the city habitable. Newgate has been pulled down, and with Newgate goes some of the strength and permanence of London. There was a horrible beauty in those impregnable grey stone walls, by the side of the city pavement. The traffic has fallen upon them like a sea, and they have melted away before it.

Lamb saw London changing, and to the end he said "London streets and faces cheer me inexpressibly, though of the latter not one known one were remaining." But to his sister it seemed that he "found it melancholy," "the very streets," he says, "altering every day." Covent Garden, where he lived, has lasted; the house he lived in still stands looking into Bow Street. And the Temple, that lucky corner of the City which is outside city jurisdiction, has been little spoiled by time, or the worse improvements of restorers. But I ask myself what Lamb would have said if he had lived to see tram-lines sliming the bank of the river, and the trees amputated to preserve the hats of living creatures, in what way better or more worthy of attention than those trees?

When I see London best is when I have been abroad for a long time. Then, as I sit on the top of an omnibus, coming in from the Marble Arch, that long line of Oxford Street seems a surprising and delightful thing, full of picturesque irregularities, and Piccadilly Circus seems incredibly alive and central, and the Strand is glutted with a traffic typically English. I am able to remember how I used to turn out of the Temple and walk slowly towards Charing Cross, elbowing my way meditatively, making up sonnets in my head while I missed no attractive face on the pavement or on the top of an omnibus, pleasantly conscious of the shops yet undistracted by them, happy because I was in the midst of people, and happier still because they were all unknown to me. For years that was my feeling about London, and now I am always grateful to a foreign absence which can put me back, if only for a day, into that comfortable frame of mind. Baudelaire's phrase, "a bath of multitude," seemed to have been made for me, and I suppose for five years or so, all the first part of the time when I was living in the Temple, I never stayed indoors for the whole of a single evening. There were times when I went out as regularly as clockwork every night on the

stroke of eleven. No sensation in London is so familiar to me as that emptiness of the Strand just before the people come out of the theatres, but an emptiness not final and absolute like that at ten o'clock; an emptiness, rather, in which there are the first stirrings of movement. The cabs shift slightly on the ranks; the cab-men take the nose-bags off the horses' heads, and climb up on their perches. There is an expectancy all along the road: Italian waiters with tight greasy hair and white aprons stand less listlessly at the tavern doors; they half turn, ready to back into the doorway before a customer.

As you walk along, the stir increases, cabs crawl out of side streets and file slowly towards the theatres; the footmen cluster about the theatre-doors; here and there someone comes out hurriedly and walks down the street. And then, all of a sudden, as if at some unheard signal, the wide doorways are blocked with slowly struggling crowds, you see tall black hats of men and the many coloured hair of women, jammed together, and slightly swaying to and fro, as if rocked from under. Black figures break through the crowd, and detach themselves against the wheels of the hansoms, a flying and disclosing cloak swishes against

the shafts and is engulfed in the dark hollow; horses start, stagger, hammer feverishly with their hoofs and are off; the whole roadway is black with cabs and carriages, and the omnibuses seem suddenly diminished. The pavement is blocked, the crowd of the doorway now sways only less helplessly upon the pavement; you see the women's distracted and irritated eyes, their hands clutching at cloaks that will not come together, the absurd and anomalous glitter of diamonds and bare necks in the streets.

Westward the crowd is more scattered, has more space to disperse. The Circus is like a whirlpool, streams pour steadily outward from the centre, where the fountain stands for a symbol. The lights glitter outside theatres and music-halls and restaurants; lights coruscate, flash from the walls, dart from the vehicles; a dark tangle of roofs and horses knots itself together and swiftly separates at every moment; all the pavements are aswarm with people hurrying.

In half an hour all this outflow will have subsided, and then one distinguishes the slow and melancholy walk of women and men, as if on some kind of penitential duty, round and round the Circus and along Piccadilly as far

as the Duke of Wellington's house and along Regent Street almost to the Circus. Few walk on the left side of Piccadilly or the right of Regent Street, though you hear foreign tongues a-chatter under the arcade. But the steady procession coils backward and forward, thickening and slackening as it rounds the Circus, where innocent people wait uncomfortably for omnibuses, standing close to the edge of the pavement. Men stand watchfully at all the corners, with their backs to the road; you hear piping voices, shrill laughter; you observe that all the women's eyes are turned sideways, never straight in front of them; and that they seem often to hesitate, as if they were not sure of the way, though they have walked in that procession night after night, and know every stone of the pavement and every moulding on the brass rims of the shop-windows. The same faces return, lessen, the people come out of the restaurants and the crowd thickens for ten minutes, then again lessens; and fewer and fewer trudge drearily along the almost deserted pavement. The staring lights are blotted suddenly from the walls; the streets seem to grow chill, uninhabited, unfriendly; the few hansoms roam up and down restlessly, seeking a last fare. And still a few dingy figures creep

along by the inner edge of the pavement, stopping by the closed doors of the shops, sometimes speaking dully to one another; then trudging heavily along, and disappearing slowly through the side streets eastward.

The part of London I have always known best is the part that lies between the Temple and Piccadilly, and some of it no longer exists. When the Strand was widened, Holywell Street, one of the oldest and quaintest streets in London, was pulled down, Wych Street went too, and Clare Market, and many dingy and twisting lanes which could well be spared. But I deeply regret Holywell Street, and when I tell strangers about it, it seems to me that they can never know London now. I suppose many people will soon forget that narrow lane with its overhanging wooden fronts, like the houses at Coventry; or they will remember it only for its surreptitious shop-windows, the glass always dusty, through which one dimly saw English translations of Zola among chemists' paraphernalia. The street had a bad reputation, and by night doors opened and shut unexpectedly up dark passages. Perhaps that vague dubiousness added a little to its charm, but by day the charm was a positive one: the book-shops! Perhaps I liked the

quays at Paris even better: it was Paris, and there was the river, and Notre Dame, and it was the left bank. But nowhere else, in no other city, was there a corner so made for book-fanciers. Those dingy shops with their stalls open to the street, nearly all on the right, the respectable side as you walked west, how seldom did I keep my resolution to walk past them with unaverted eyes, how rarely did I resist their temptations. Half the books I possess were bought secondhand in Holywell Street, and what bargains I have made out of the fourpenny books! On the hottest days, there was shade there, and excuse for lounging. It was a paradise for the book-lover.

It never occurred to me that any street so old could seem worth pulling down; but the improvements came, and that and the less interesting streets near, where the Globe Theatre was (I thought it no loss) had of course to go; and Dane's Inn went, which was never a genuine "inn," but had some of the pleasant genuine dreariness; and Clare Market was obliterated, and I believe Drury Lane is getting furbished up and losing its old savour of squalor; and Aldwych is there, with its beautiful name, but itself so big and obvious that I confess, with my recollections of what

was there before, I can never find my way in it.

Striking westward, my course generally led me through Leicester Square. The foreign quarter of London radiates from Leicester Square, or winds inward to that point as to a centre. Its foreign aspect, the fact that it was the park of Soho, interested me. In Leicester Square, and in all the tiny streets running into it, you are never in the really normal London: it is an escape, a sort of shamefaced and sordid and yet irresistible reminder of Paris and Italy. The little restaurants all round brought me local colour before I had seen Italy; I still see with pleasure the straw covered bottles and the strings of maccaroni in the undusted windows. The foreign people you see are not desirable people: what does that matter if you look on them as on so many puppets on a string, and their shapes and colours come as a relief to you after the uniform puppets of English make?

I have always been apt to look on the world as a puppet-show, and all the men and women merely players, whose wires we do not see working. There is a passage in one of Keats' letters which expresses just what I have always felt: "May there not," he says, "be superior

beings, amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind may fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of the stoat or the anxiety of a deer?" Is there not, in our aspect towards one another, something inevitably automatic? Do we see, in the larger part of those fellow-creatures whom our eyes rest on more than a smile, a gesture, a passing or a coming forward? Are they more real to us than the actors on a stage, the quivering phantoms of a cinematograph? With their own private existence we have nothing to do: do they not, so far as we are concerned, exist in part at least to be a spectacle to us, to convey to us a sense of life, change, beauty, variety, necessity? The spectacle of human life is not only for the gods' eyes, but for ours; it is ours in so far as we can apprehend it, and our pleasure and satisfaction here are largely dependent on the skill with which we have trained ourselves to that instinctive, delighted apprehension. To a few here and there we can come closer, we can make them, by some illusion of the affections, seem more real to us. But as for all the rest, let us be content to admire, to wonder, to see the use and beauty and curiosity of them, and intrude no further into their destinies.

It was for their very obvious qualities of illusion that I liked to watch the people in the foreign quarter. They were like prisoners there, thriving perhaps but discontented; none of them light-hearted, as they would have been in their own country; grudgingly at home. And there was much piteous false show among them, soiled sordid ostentation, a little of what we see in the older songs of Yvette Guilbert.

London was for a long time my supreme sensation, and to roam in the streets, especially after the lamps were lighted, my chief pleasure. I had no motive in it, merely the desire to get out of doors, and to be among people, lights, to get out of myself. Myself has always been so absorbing to me that it was perhaps natural that, along with that habitual companionship, there should be at times the desire for escape. When I was living alone in the Temple, that desire came over me almost every night, and made work, or thought without work, impossible. Later in the night I was often able to work with perfect quiet, but not unless I had been out in the streets first. The plunge through the Middle Temple gateway was like the swimmer's plunge into rough water: I got just that "cool shock" as I went outside into the brighter lights and the movement. I often

had no idea where I was going, I often went nowhere. I walked, and there were people about me.

I lived in Fountain Court for ten years, and I thought then, and think still, that it is the most beautiful place in London. Dutch people have told me that the Temple is like a little Dutch town, and that as they enter from Fleet Street into Middle Temple Lane they can fancy themselves at the Hague. Dutchmen are happy if they have much that can remind them of Middle Temple Lane. There is a moment when you are in Fleet Street; you have forced your way through the long Strand, along those narrow pavements, in a continual coming and going of hurried people, with the continual rumble of wheels in the road, the swaying heights of omnibuses beside you, distracting your eyes, the dust, clatter, confusion, heat, bewilderment of that thoroughfare; and suddenly you go under a low doorway, where large wooden doors and a smaller side-door stand open, and you are suddenly in quiet. The roar has dropped, as the roar of the sea drops if you go in at your door and shut it behind you. At night, when one had to knock, and so waited, and was admitted with a nice formality, it was sometimes almost startling. I

have never felt any quiet in solitary places so much as the quiet of that contrast: Fleet Street and the Temple.

No wheels could come nearer to me in Fountain Court than Middle Temple Lane, but I liked to hear sometimes at night a faint clattering, only just audible, which I knew was the sound of a cab on the Embankment. The County Council, steadily ruining London with the persistence of an organic disease, is busy turning the Embankment into a gangway for electric trams; but when I knew it it was a quiet, almost secluded place, where people sauntered and leaned over to look into the water, and where, at night, the policemen would walk with considerately averted head past the slumbering heaps of tired rags on the seats.

The gates on the Embankment shut early but I often came home by the river and I could hardly tear myself away from looking over that grey harsh parapet. The Neva reminds me a little of the Thames, though it rushes more wildly, and at night is more like a sea, with swift lights crossing it. But I do not know the river of any great capital which has the fascination of our river. Whistler has created the Thames, for most people; but the Thames

existed before Whistler, and will exist after the County Council. I remember hearing Claude Monet say, at the time when he came over to the Savoy Hotel, year by year, to paint Waterloo Bridge from its windows, that he could not understand why any English painter ever left London. I felt almost as if the river belonged to the Temple: its presence there, certainly, was part of its mysterious anomaly, a fragment of old London, walled and guarded in that corner of land between Fleet Street and the Thames.

It was the name, partly, that had drawn me to Fountain Court, and the odd coincidence that I had found myself, not long before, in what was once Blake's Fountain Court, and then Southampton Buildings, now only a date on a wall. I had the top flat in what is really the back of one of the old houses in Essex Street, taken into the Temple; it had a stone balcony from which I looked down on a wide open court, with a stone fountain in the middle, broad rows of stone steps leading upward and downward, with a splendid effect of decoration; in one corner of the court was Middle Temple Hall, where a play of Shakespeare's was acted while Shakespeare was alive; all around were the backs of old buildings, and there were old

trees, under which there was a bench in summer, and there was the glimpse of gardens going down to the Embankment. By day it was as legal and busy as any other part of the Temple, but the mental business of the law is not inelegantly expressed in those wigged and gowned figures who are generally to be seen crossing between the Law Courts and their chambers in the Temple. I felt, when I saw them, that I was the intruder, the modern note, and that they were in their place, and keeping up a tradition. But at night I had the place to myself.

The nights in Fountain Court were a continual delight to me. I lived then chiefly by night, and when I came in late I used often to sit on the bench under the trees, where no one else ever sat at those hours. I sat there, looking at the silent water in the basin of the fountain, and at the leaves overhead, and at the sky through the leaves; and that solitude was only broken by the careful policeman on guard, who would generally stroll up to be quite certain that it was the usual loiterer, who had a right to sit there. Sometimes he talked with me, and occasionally about books; and once he made a surprising and profound criticism, for on my asking him if he had read Tennyson

he said no, but was he not rather a lady-like writer?

When Verlaine stayed with me he wrote a poem about Fountain Court, which began truthfully:

> La Cour de la Fontaine est, dans le Temple,
> Un coin exquis de ce coin délicat
> Du Londres vieux.

Dickens of course has written about the fountain, but there is only one man who could ever have given its due to that corner of the Temple, and he had other, less lovely corners to love. I say over everything Charles Lamb wrote about the Temple, and fancy it was meant for Fountain Court.

More than once, while I was living in the Temple, I was visited by a strange friend of mine, an amateur tramp, with whom I used to wander about London every night in the East End, and about the Docks, and in all the more squalid parts of the city. My friend was born a wanderer, and I do not know what remains for him in the world when he has tramped over its whole surface. I have known him for many years, and we have explored many cities together, and crossed more than one sea, and travelled along the highroads of

more than one country. His tramping with me was not very serious, but when he is alone he goes as a tramp among tramps, taking no money with him, begging his way with beggars. A little, pale, thin young man, quietly restless, with determined eyes and tight lips, a face prepared for all disguises, yet with a strangely personal life looking out at you, ambiguously enough, from underneath, he is never quite at home under a roof or in the company of ordinary people, where he seems always like one caught and detained unwillingly. An American, who has studied in a German University, brought up, during all his early life, in Berlin, he has always had a fixed distaste for the interests of those about him, and an instinctive passion for whatever exists outside the borderline which shuts us in upon respectability. There is a good deal of affectation in the literary revolt against respectability, together with a child's desire to shock its elders, and snatch a lurid reputation from those whom it professes to despise. My friend has never had any of this affectation; life is not a masquerade to him, and his disguises are the most serious part of his life. The simple fact is, that respectability, the normal existence of normal people, does not interest him; he could not

even tell you why, without searching consciously for reasons; he was born with the soul of a vagabond, into a family of gentle, exquisitely refined people: he was born so, that is all. Human curiosity, curiosity which in most of us is subordinate to some more definite purpose, exists in him for its own sake; it is his inner life, he has no other; his form of self-development, his form of culture. It seems to me that this man, who has seen so much of humanity, who has seen humanity so closely, where it has least temptation to be anything but itself, has really achieved culture almost perfect of its kind, though the kind be of his own invention. He is not an artist, who can create; he is not a thinker or a dreamer or a man of action; he is a student of men and women, and of the outcasts among men and women, just those persons who are least accessible, least cared for, least understood, and therefore, to one like my friend, most alluring. He is not conscious of it, but I think there is a great pity at the heart of this devouring curiosity. It is his love of the outcast which makes him like to live with outcasts, not as a visitor in their midst, but as one of themselves.

For here is the difference between this man

and the other adventurers who have gone abroad among tramps and criminals, and other misunderstood or unfortunate people. Some have been philanthropists and have gone with Bibles in their hands; others have been journalists, and have gone with note-books in their hands; all have gone as visitors, as passing visitors, plunging into "the bath of multitude," as one might go holiday-making to the sea-side and plunge into the sea. But this man, wherever he has gone, has gone with a complete abandonment to his surroundings; no tramp has ever known that "Cigarette" was not really a tramp; he has begged, worked, ridden outside trains, slept in workhouses and gaols, not shirked one of the hardships of his way; and all the time he has been living his own life (whatever that enigma may be!) more perfectly, I am sure, than when he is dining every day at his mother's or his sister's table.

The desire of travelling on many roads, and the desire of seeing many foreign faces, are almost always found united in that half-unconscious instinct which makes a man a vagabond. But I have never met anyone in whom the actual love of the road is so strong as it is in my friend. In America, where the tramps ride over and under the trains, in

order that they may get on the other side of a thousand miles without spending a lifetime about it, he, too, has gone by rail, not as a passenger. And I remember a few years ago, when we had given one another rendezvous at St. Petersburg, that I found, when I got there, that he was already half-way across Siberia, on the new railway which they were in the act of making. Also I have been with him to Hamburg and Le Havre and Antwerp by sea: once on an Atlantic liner, loaded with foreign Jews, among whom he spent most of his time in the steerage. But for the most part he walks. Wherever he walks he makes friends; when we used to walk about London together he would stop to talk with every drunken old woman in Drury Lane, and get into the confidence of every sailor whom we came upon in the pot-houses about the docks. He is not fastidious, and will turn his hand, as the phrase is, to anything. And he goes through every sort of privation, endures dirt, accustoms himself to the society of every variety of his fellow-creatures without a murmur or regret.

After all, comfort is a convention, and pleasure an individual thing, to every individual. "To travel is to die continually," wrote a

half-crazy poet who spent most of the years of a short fantastic life in London. Well, that is a line which I have often found myself repeating as I shivered in railway-stations on the other side of Europe, or lay in a plunging berth as the foam chased the snow-flakes off the deck. One finds, no doubt, a particular pleasure in looking back on past discomforts, and I am convinced that a good deal of the attraction of travelling comes from an unconscious throwing forward of the mind to the time when the uncomfortable present shall have become a stirring memory of the past. But I am speaking now for those in whom a certain luxuriousness of temperament finds itself in sharp conflict with the desire of movement. To my friend, I think, this is hardly a conceivable state of mind. He is a Stoic, as the true adventurer should be. Rest, even as a change, does not appeal to him. He thinks acutely, but only about facts, about the facts before him; and so he does not need to create an atmosphere about himself which change might disturb. He is fond of his family, his friends; but he can do without them, like a man with a mission. He has no mission, only a great thirst; and this thirst for the humanity of every nation and for the

roads of every country drives him onward as resistlessly as the drunkard's thirst for drink, or the idealist's thirst for an ideal.

And it seems to me that few men have realized, as this man has realized, that "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end." He has chosen his life for himself, and he has lived it, regardless of anything else in the world. He has desired strange, almost inaccessible things, and he has attained whatever he has desired. While other men have lamented their fate, wished their lives different, nursed vague ambitions, and dreamed fruitless dreams, he has quietly given up comfort and conventionality, not caring for them, and he has gone his own way without even stopping to think whether the way were difficult or desirable. Not long since, walking with a friend in the streets of New York, he said suddenly: "Do you know, I wonder what it is like to chase a man? I know what it is like to be chased, but to chase a man would be a new sensation." The other man laughed, and thought no more about it. A week later my friend came to him with an official document: he had been appointed a private detective. He was set on the track of a famous criminal (whom, as it happened,

he had known as a tramp); he made his plans, worked them out successfully, and the criminal was caught. To have done it was enough: he had had the sensation; he has done no more work as a detective. Is there not, in this curiosity in action, this game mastered and then cast aside, a wonderful promptness, sureness, a moral quality which is itself success in life?

To desire so much, and what is so human, to make one's life out of the very fact of living it as one chooses; to create a unique personal satisfaction out of discontent and curiosity; to be so much oneself in learning so much from other people: is not this, in its way, an ideal, and has not my friend achieved it? What I like in him so much is that he is a vagabond without an object. He has written one book, but writing has come to him as an accident; and, in writing, his danger is to be too literal for art, and not quite literal enough for science. He is too completely absorbed in people and things to be able ever to get aloof from them; and to write well of what one has done and seen one must be able to get aloof from oneself and from others. If ever a man loved wandering for its own sake it was George Borrow; but George Borrow had a serious

and whimsical brain always at work, twisting the things that he saw into shapes that pleased him more than the shapes of the things in themselves. My friend is interested in what he calls sociology, but the interest is almost as accidental as his interest in literature or in philanthropy. He has the soul and feet of the vagabond, the passion of the roads. He is restless under any roof but the roof of stars. He cares passionately for men and women, not because they are beautiful or good or clever, or because he can do them good, or because they can be serviceable to him, but because they are men and women. And he cares for men and women where they are most vividly themselves, where they have least need for disguise; for poor people, and people on the roads, idle people, criminals sometimes, the people who are so much themselves that they are no longer a part of society. He wanders over the whole earth, but he does not care for the beauty or strangeness of what he sees, only for the people. Writing to me lately from Samarcand, he said: "I have seen the tomb of the prophet Daniel; I have seen the tomb of Tamerlane." But Tamerlane was nothing to him, the prophet Daniel was nothing to him. He mentioned them only be-

cause they would interest me. He was trying to puzzle out and piece together the psychology of the Persian beggar whom he had left at the corner of the way.

IV

WHEN my French friends come to London they say to me: where is your Montmartre, where is your Quartier Latin? We have no Montmartre (not even Chelsea is that), no Quartier Latin, because there is no instinct in the Englishman to be companionable in public. Occasions are lacking, it is true, for the café is responsible for a good part of the artistic Bohemianism of Paris, and we have no cafés. I prophesy in these pages that some day someone, probably an American who has come by way of Paris, will set back the plate-glass windows in many angles, which I could indicate to him, of the Strand, Piccadilly, and other streets, and will turn the whole wall into windows, and leave a space in front for a *terrasse*, in the Paris manner, and we shall have cafés like the cafés in Paris, and the *prestidigitateur* who has done this will soon have made a gigantic fortune. But meanwhile let us recognise that there is in London no companionship in public (in the open air or

visible through windows) and that nothing in Cafés Royaux and Monicos and the like can have the sort of meaning for young men in London that the cafés have long had, and still have, in Paris. Attempts have been made, and I have shared in them, and for their time they had their entertainment; but I have not seen one that flourished.

I remember the desperate experiments of some to whom Paris, from a fashion, had become almost a necessity; and how Dowson took to cabmen's shelters as a sort of supper-club. Different taverns were at different times haunted by young writers; some of them came for the drink and some for the society; and one bold attempt was made to get together a *cénacle* in quite the French manner in the upper room of a famous old inn. In London we cannot read our poems to one another, as they do in Paris; we cannot even talk about our own works, frankly, with a natural pride, a good-humoured equality. They can do that in Dublin, and in an upper room in Dublin I find it quite natural. But in London even those of us who are least Anglo-Saxon cannot do it. Is it more, I wonder, a loss to us or a gain?

This lack of easy meeting and talking is

certainly one of the reasons why there have been in England many great writers but few schools. In Paris a young man of twenty starts a "school" as he starts a "revue"; and these hasty people are in France often found among the people who last. In modern England we have gained, more than we think perhaps, from the accidents of neighbourhood that set Wordsworth and Coleridge walking and talking together. As it was England, and one of them was Wordsworth, they met in Cumberland; in London we have had nothing like the time of Victor Hugo, when Baudelaire and Gautier and Gérard de Nerval and men of obscure and vagabond genius made Paris vital, a part of themselves, a form of creative literature. That is what London has in itself the genius, the men and the material, to be; but of the men of our time only Henley and John Davidson have loved it or struck music out of it.

If we had only had a Walt Whitman for London! Whitman is one of the voices of the earth, and it is only in Whitman that the paving-stones really speak, with a voice as authentic as the voice of the hills. He knew no distinction between what is called the work of nature and what is the work of men. He

left out nothing, and what still puzzles us is the blind, loving, embracing way in which he brings crude names and things into his vision, the name of a trade, a street, a territory, no matter what syllables it might carry along with it. He created a vital poetry of cities; it was only a part of what he did; but since Whitman there is no gainsaying it any longer.

When I came to London, I knew nothing of the great things that Whitman had done, or that it was possible to do them in such a way; but I had my own feeling for London, my own point of view there, and I found myself gradually trying to paint, or to set to music, to paint in music, perhaps, those sensations which London awakened in me. I was only trying to render what I saw before me, what I felt, and to make my art out of living material. "Books made out of books pass away" was a sentence I never forgot, and my application of it was direct and immediate.

I have always been curious of sensations, and above all of those which seemed to lead one into "artificial paradises" not within everybody's reach. It took me some time to find out that every "artificial paradise" is within one's own soul, somewhere among one's own dreams, and that haschisch is a

poor substitute for the imagination. The mystery of all the intoxicants fascinated me, and drink, which had no personal appeal to me, which indeed brought me no pleasures, found me endlessly observant of its powers, effects, and variations.

Many of my friends drank, and I was forced to become acquainted with the different forms which liquor could take, so that I could almost label them in their classes. Thus one, whom I will call A., drank copiously, continually, all drinks, for pleasure: he could carry so much so steadily that he sometimes passed his limit without knowing it: not that he minded passing the limit, but he liked to be conscious of it. B. drank to become unconscious, he passed his limit rapidly, and became first apologetic, then quarrelsome. His friend C., a man abstract in body and mind, who muttered in Greek when he was least conscious of himself, and sat with imperturbable gravity, drinking like an ascetic, until his head fell without warning on the table, seemed to compete with B. in how to finish soonest with a life which he had no desire to get rid of. I do not think he ever got any pleasure out of drinking: he would sit up over night with absinthe and cigarettes in order to be awake to attend early

mass; but though his will was strong enough for that, the habit was stronger than his will, and he seemed like one condemned to that form of suicide without desire or choice in the matter. D. drank for pleasure, but he was scrupulous in what he drank, and would take menthe verte for its colour, absinthe because it lulled him with vague dreams, ether because it could be taken on strawberries. I remember his telling me exactly what it feels like to have delirium tremens, and he told it minutely, self-pityingly, but with a relish; not without a melancholy artistic pride in the sensations, their strangeness, and the fact that he should have been the victim.

There were others; there was even one who cured himself in some miraculous way, and could see his friends drink champagne at his expense, while he drank soda-water. All these I wondered at and fancied that I understood. I admit that I was the more interested in these men because they were living in the way I call artificial. I never thought anyone the better for being a spendthrift of any part of his energies, but I certainly often found him more interesting than those who were not spendthrifts.

I also found a peculiar interest in another

part of what is artificial, properly artificial, in London. A city is no part of nature, and one may choose among the many ways in which something peculiar to walls and roofs and artificial lighting, is carried on. All commerce and all industries have their share in taking us further from nature and further from our needs, as they create about us unnatural conditions which are really what develop in us these new, extravagant, really needless needs. And the whole night-world of the stage is, in its way, a part of the very soul of cities. That lighted gulf, before which the footlights are the flaming stars between world and world, shows the city the passions and that beauty which the soul of man in cities is occupied in weeding out of its own fruitful and prepared soil.

That is, the theatres are there to do so, they have no reason for existence if they do not do so; but for the most part they do not do so. The English theatre with its unreal realism and its unimaginative pretences towards poetry left me untouched and unconvinced. I found the beauty, the poetry, that I wanted only in two theatres that were not looked upon as theatres, the Alhambra and the Empire. The ballet seemed to me the subtlest of the visible

arts, and dancing a more significant speech than words. I could almost have said seriously, as Verlaine once said in jest, coming away from the Alhambra: "J'aime Shakespeare, mais . . . j'aime mieux le ballet!" Why is it that one can see a ballet fifty times, always with the same sense of pleasure, while the most absorbing play becomes a little tedious after the third time of seeing? For one thing, because the difference between seeing a play and seeing a ballet is just the difference between reading a book and looking at a picture. One returns to a picture as one returns to nature, for a delight which, being purely of the senses, never tires, never distresses, never varies. To read a book even for the first time, requires a certain effort. The book must indeed be exceptional that can be read three or four times, and no book was ever written that could be read three or four times in succession. A ballet is simply a picture in movement. It is a picture where the imitation of nature is given by nature itself; where the figures of the composition are real, and yet, by a very paradox of travesty, have a delightful, deliberate air of unreality. It is a picture where the colours change, re-combine, before one's eyes; where the outlines melt into one

another, emerge, and are again lost, in the kaleidoscopic movement of the dance. Here we need tease ourselves with no philosophies, need endeavour to read none of the riddles of existence; may indeed give thanks to be spared for one hour the imbecility of human speech. After the tedium of the theatre, where we are called on to interest ourselves in the improbable fortunes of uninteresting people, how welcome is the relief of a spectacle which professes to be no more than merely beautiful; which gives us, in accomplished dancing, the most beautiful human sight; which provides, in short, the one escape into fairy-land which is permitted by that tyranny of the real which is the worst tyranny of modern life.

The most magical glimpse I ever caught of a ballet was from the road in front, from the other side of the road, one night when two doors were suddenly thrown open as I was passing. In the moment's interval before the doors closed again, I saw, in that odd, unexpected way, over the heads of the audience, far off in a sort of blue mist, the whole stage, its brilliant crowd drawn up in the last pose, just as the curtain was beginning to go down. It stamped itself in my brain, an impression caught just at the perfect moment, by some

rare felicity of chance. But that is not an impression that can be repeated. For the most part I like to see my illusions clearly, recognizing them as illusions, and so heightening their charm. I liked to see a ballet from the wings, a spectator, but in the midst of the magic. To see a ballet from the wings is to lose all sense of proportion, all knowledge of the piece as a whole, but, in return, it is fruitful in happy accidents, in momentary points of view, in chance felicities of light and shade and movement. It is almost to be in the performance oneself, and yet passive, with the leisure to look about one. You see the reverse of the picture: the girls at the back lounging against the set scenes, turning to talk with someone at the side; you see how lazily some of them are moving, and how mechanical and irregular are the motions that flow into rhythm when seen from the front. Now one is in the centre of a joking crowd, hurrying from the dressing-rooms to the stage; now the same crowd returns, charging at full speed between the scenery, everyone trying to reach the dressing-room stairs first. And there is the constant travelling of scenery, from which one has a series of escapes, as it bears down unexpectedly in some new direction. The ballet

half seen in the centre of the stage, seen in sections, has, in the glimpses that can be caught of it, a contradictory appearance of mere nature and of absolute unreality. And beyond the footlights, on the other side of the orchestra, one can see the boxes near the stalls, the men standing by the bar, an angle cut sharply off from the stalls, with the light full on the faces, the intent eyes, the grey smoke curling up from the cigarettes: a Degas, in short.

And there is a charm, which I cannot think wholly imaginary or factitious, in that form of illusion which is known as make-up. To a plain face, it is true, make-up only intensifies plainness; for make-up does but give colour and piquancy to what is already in a face, it adds nothing new. But to a face already charming, how becoming all this is, what a new kind of exciting savour it gives to that real charm! It has, to the remnant of Puritan conscience or consciousness that is the heritage of us all, a certain sense of dangerous wickedness, the delight of forbidden fruit. The very phrase, painted women, has come to have an association of sin, and to have put paint on her cheeks, though for the innocent necessities of her profession, gives to a woman a kind of

symbolic corruption. At once she seems to typify the sorceries, and entanglements of what is most deliberately enticing in her sex:

"Femina dulce malum, pariter favus atque venenum—"

with all that is most subtle, least like nature, in her power to charm. Maquillage, to be attractive, must of course be unnecessary. As a disguise for age or misfortune, it has no interest. But, of all places, on the stage, and, of all people, on the cheeks of young people; there, it seems to me that make-up is intensely fascinating, and its recognition is of the essence of my delight in a stage performance. I do not for a moment want really to believe in what I see before me; to believe that those wigs are hair, that grease-paint a blush; any more than I want really to believe that the actor who has just crossed the stage in his everyday clothes has turned into an actual King when he puts on clothes that look like a King's clothes. I know that a delightful imposition is being practised upon me; that I am to see fairy-land for a while; and to me all that glitters shall be gold.

The ballet in particular, but also the whole surprising life of the music halls, took hold of me with the charm of what was least real

among the pompous and distressing unrealities of a great city. And some form I suppose of that instinct which has created the gladiatorial shows and the bull-fight made me fascinated by the faultless and fatal art of the acrobat, who sets his life in the wager, and wins the wager by sheer skill, a triumph of fine shades. That love of fine shades took me angrily past the spoken vulgarities of most music-hall singing (how much more priceless do they make the silence of dancing!) to that one great art of fine shades, made up out of speech just lifted into song, which has been revealed to us by Yvette Guilbert.

I remember when I first heard her in Paris, and tried, vainly at the time, to get the English managers to bring her over to London. She sang "Sainte Galette," and as I listened to the song I felt a cold shiver run down my back, that shiver which no dramatic art except that of Sarah Bernhardt had ever given me. It was not this that I was expecting to find in the thin woman with the long black gloves. I had heard that her songs were immoral, and that her manner was full of underhand intention. What I found was a moral so poignant, so human, that I could scarcely endure the pity of it, it made me feel that I was wicked,

not that she was; I, to have looked at these dreadfully serious things lightly. Later on, in London, I heard her sing "La Soularde," that song in which, as Goncourt notes in his journal, "la diseuse de chansonnettes se revèle comme une grande, une très grande actrice tragique, vous mettant au cœur une constriction angoisseuse." It is about an old drunken woman, whom the children follow and laugh at in the streets. Yvette imitates her old waggling head, her tottering walk, her broken voice, her little sudden furies, her miserable resignation; she suggests all this, almost without moving, by the subtlest pantomime, the subtlest inflections of voice and face, and she thrills you with the grotesque pathos of the whole situation, with the intense humanity of it. I imagine such a situation rendered by an English music-hall singer! Imagine the vulgarity, the inhumanity, of the sort of beery caricature that we should get, in place of this absolutely classic study in the darker and more sordid side of life. The art of Yvette Guilbert is always classic; it has restraint, form, dignity, in its wildest licence. Its secret is its expressiveness, and the secret of that expressiveness lies perhaps largely in its attention to detail. Others are content with

making an effect, say twice, in the course of a song. Yvette Guilbert insists on getting the full meaning out of every line, but quietly, without emphasis, as if in passing; and, with her, to grasp a meaning is to gain an effect.

There was the one great artist of that world which, before I could apprehend it, had to be reflected back to me as in some bewildering mirror. It was out of mere curiosity that I had found my way into that world, into that mirror, but, once there, the thing became material for me. I tried to do in verse something of what Degas had done in painting. I was conscious of transgressing no law of art in taking that scarcely touched material for new uses. Here, at least, was a *décor* which appealed to me, and which seemed to me full of strangeness, beauty, and significance. I still think that there is a poetry in this world of illusion, not less genuine of its kind than that more easily apprehended poetry of a world, so little more real, that poets have mostly turned to. It is part of the poetry of cities, and it waits for us in London.

V

A CITY is characterized by its lights, and it is to its lights, acting on its continual mist, that London owes much of the mystery of its beauty. On a winter afternoon every street in London becomes mysterious. You see even the shops through a veil, people are no longer distinguishable as persons, but are a nimble flock of shadows. Lights travel and dance through alleys that seem to end in darkness. Every row of gas lamps turns to a trail of fire; fiery stars shoot and flicker in the night. Night becomes palpable, and not only an absence of the light of day.

The most beautiful lighting of a city is the lighting of one street in Rome by low-swung globes of gas that hang like oranges down the Via Nazionale, midway between the houses. In London we light casually, capriciously, everyone at his own will, and so there are blinding shafts at one step and a pit of darkness at the next, and it is an adventure to follow the lights in any direction, the lights

are all significant and mean some place of entertainment or the ambition of some shopkeeper. They draw one by the mere curiosity to find out why they are there, what has set them signalling. And, as you walk beyond or aside from the shops, all these private illuminations are blotted out, and the dim, sufficing street-gas of the lamp-posts takes their place.

The canals, in London, have a mysterious quality, made up of sordid and beautiful elements, now a black trail, horrible, crawling secretly; now a sudden opening, as at Maida Vale, between dull houses, upon the sky. At twilight in winter the canal smokes and flares, a long line of water with its double row of lamps, dividing the land. From where Browning lived for so many years there is an aspect which might well have reminded him of Venice. The canal parts, and goes two ways, broadening to almost a lagoon, where trees droop over the water from a kind of island, with rocky houses perched on it. You see the curve of a bridge, formed by the shadow into a pure circle, and lighted by the reflection of a gas-lamp in the water beyond; and the dim road opposite following the line of the canal, might be a calle; only the long hull of a barge lying there is not Venetian in shape, and, decidedly,

the atmosphere is not Venetian. Verlaine, not knowing, I think, that Browning lived there, made a poem about the canal, which he dated "Paddington." It is one of his two "Streets," and it begins: "O la rivière dans la rue," and goes on to invoke "l'eau jaune comme une morte," with nothing to reflect but the fog. The barges crawl past with inexpressible slowness; coming out slowly after the horse and the rope from under the bridge, with a woman leaning motionless against the helm, and drifting on as if they were not moving at all.

On the river the lights are always at work building fairy-palaces; wherever there are trees they wink like stars through drifting cloud, and the trees become oddly alive, with a more restless life than their life by day. I have seen a plain churchyard with its straight gravestones turn on a winter afternoon into a sea of white rocks, with vague rosy shore lights beyond. But it is the fog which lends itself to the supreme London decoration, collaborating with gaslight through countless transformations, from the white shroud to the yellow blanket, until every gas-lamp is out, and you cannot see a torch a yard beyond your feet.

There is nothing in the world quite like a London fog, though the underground railway

stations in the days of steam might have prepared us for it and Dante has described it in the "Inferno" when he speaks of the banks of a pit in hell, "crusted over with a mould from the vapour below, which cakes upon them, and battles with eye and nose." Foreigners praise it as the one thing in which London is unique. They come to London to experience it. It is as if one tried the experience of drowning or suffocating. It is a penalty worse than any Chinese penalty. It stifles the mind as well as choking the body. It comes on slowly and stealthily, picking its way, choosing its direction, leaving contemptuous gaps in its course; then it settles down like a blanket of solid smoke, which you can feel but not put from you. The streets turn putrescent, the gas-lamps hang like rotting fruit, you are in a dark tunnel, in which the lights are going out, and beside you, unseen, there is a roar and rumble, interrupted with sharp cries, a stopping of wheels and a beginning of the roar and rumble over again. You walk like a blind man, fumbling with his staff at the edge of the pavement. Familiar turnings, which you fancied you could follow blindfold, deceive you, and you are helpless if you go two yards out of your course. The grime

blackens your face, your eyes smart, your throat is as if choked with dust. You breathe black foulness and it enters into you and contaminates you.

And yet, how strange, inexplicable, mysteriously impressive is this masque of shadows! It is the one wholly complete transformation of the visible world, the one darkness which is really visible, the one creation of at least the beauty of horror which has been made by dirt, smoke, and cities.

Yet the eternal smoke of London lies in wait for us, not only in the pestilence of chimneys, but rising violently out of the earth, in a rhetoric of its own. There are in London certain gaps or holes in the earth, which are like vent-holes, and out of these openings its inner ferment comes for a moment to the surface. One of them is at Chalk Farm Station. There is a gaunt cavernous doorway leading underground, and this doorway faces three roads from the edge of a bridge. The bridge crosses an abyss of steam, which rises out of depths like the depths of a boiling pot, only it is a witches' pot of noise and fire; and pillars and pyramids of smoke rise continually out of it, and there are hoarse cries, screams, a clashing and rattling, the sound

as of a movement which struggles and cannot escape, like the coiling of serpents twisting together in a pit. Their breath rises in clouds, and drifts voluminously over the gap of the abyss; catching at times a ghastly colour from the lamplight. Sometimes one of the snakes seems to rise and sway out of the tangle, a column of yellow blackness. Multitudes of red and yellow eyes speckle the vague and smoky darkness, out of which rise domes and roofs and chimneys; and a few astonished trees lean over the mouth of the pit, sucking up draughts of smoke for air.

VI

IS there any city in which life and the conditions of life can be more abject than in London, any city in which the poor are more naturally unhappy, and less able to shake off or come through their poverty into any natural relief? Those sordid splendours of smoke and dirt which may be so fine as aspects, mean something which we can only express by the English word squalor; they mean the dishumanising of innumerable people who have no less right than ourselves to exist naturally. I will take one road, which I know well, and which everyone who lives in London must know somewhat, for it is a main artery, Edgware Road, as a parable of what I mean. Nowhere in London is there more material for a comparative study in living.

Edgware Road begins proudly in the West End of London, sweeping off in an emphatic curve from the railings of Hyde Park, beyond the Marble Arch; it grows meaner before Chapel Street, and from Chapel Street to the

flower-shanty by the canal, where Maida Vale goes down hill, it seems to concentrate into itself all the sordidness of London. Walking outward from Chapel Street, on the right-hand side of the road, you plunge instantly into a dense, parching, and enveloping smell, made up of stale fish, rotting vegetables, and the must of old clothes. The pavement is never clean; bits of torn paper, fragments of cabbage leaves, the rind of fruit, the stalks of flowers, the litter swept away from the front of shops and lingering on its way to the gutter, drift to and fro under one's feet, moist with rain or greased with mud. As one steps out of the way of a slimy greyness on the ground, one brushes against a coat on which the dirt has caked or a skirt which it streaks damply. Women in shawls, with untidy hair, turn down into the road from all the side streets, and go in and out of the shops. They carry baskets, bags, and parcels wrapped in newspapers; grease oozes through the paper, smearing it with printer's ink as it melts. They push perambulators in front of them, in which children with smeared faces pitch and roll; they carry babies under their shawls. Men with unshaven faces, holding short clay pipes between their teeth, walk shamblingly at their side; the men's clothes

are discoloured with time and weather, and hang loosely about them, as if they had been bought ready-made; they have dirty scarves knotted round their necks, and they go along without speaking. Men with thread-bare frock coats, ill-fitting and carefully brushed, pass nervously, with white faces and thin fingers. Heavy men with whips in their hands, thin, clean-shaven men in short coats and riding gaiters, lounge in front of the horse-dealer's across the road, or outside dusty shops with bundles of hay and sacks of bran in their doorways.

Here and there a gaudy sheet slung across a window announces a fat woman on show, or a collection of waxworks with the latest murder; flags and streamers, daubed with ragged lettering, hang out from the upper windows. At intervals, along the pavement, there are girls offering big bunches of white and yellow flowers; up the side streets there are barrows of plants and ferns and flowers in pots; and the very odour of the flowers turns sickly, as the infection of the air sucks it up and mingles it with the breath and sweat of the people and the ancient reek of clothes that have grown old upon unwashed bodies.

Sometimes a pavement artist brings his

pictures with him on a square canvas, and ties a string in front of them, propping them against the wall, and sits on the ground at one end, with his cap in his hand. At regular intervals a Punch and Judy comes to one of the side streets, just in from the road, a little melancholy white dog with a red ruff about its neck barks feebly as the puppets flap their noses in its face. On Sundays the Salvation Army holds meetings, with flags flying and loud brass instruments playing; the red caps and black sun-bonnets can be seen in the hollow midst of the crowd. Not far off, men dressed in surplices stand beside a harmonium, with prayer-books in their hands; a few people listen to them half-heartedly. There are generally one or two Italian women, with bright green birds in their cages, huddled in the corner of doorways and arches, waiting to tell fortunes. A blind beggar in a tall hat stands at the edge of the curbstone; he has a tray of matches and boot-laces to sell; he holds a stick in his hand, with which he paws nervously at an inch of pavement; his heel seeks the gutter, and feels its way up and down from gutter to pavement.

Somewhere along the road there is generally a little crowd; a horse has fallen, or a woman

has lost a penny in the mud, or a policeman, note-book in hand, is talking to a cabdriver who has upset a bicycle. Two women are quarrelling; they tear at the handle of a perambulator in which two babies sit and smile cheerfully. Two men grapple with each other in the middle of the road, almost under the horses of the omnibus; the driver stops his horses, so as not to run them down. A coarse, red-faced woman of fifty drags an old woman by the arm; she is almost too old to walk, and she totters and spreads out her arms helplessly as the other pulls at her; her head turns on her shoulder, looking out blindly, the mouth falling open in a convulsive grimace, the whole face eaten away with some obscure suffering which she is almost past feeling. A barrel-organ plays violently; some youths stare at the picture of the fat, half-naked lady on the front of the instrument; one or two children hold out their skirts in both hands and begin to dance to the tune.

On Saturday night the Road is lined with stalls; naphtha flames burn over every stall, flaring away from the wind, and lighting up the faces that lean towards them from the crowd on the pavement. There are stalls with plants, cheap jewelry, paper books, scarves

and braces, sweets, bananas, ice-cream barrows, weighing-machines; long rows of rabbits hang by their trussed hind legs, and a boy skins them rapidly with a pen-knife for the buyers; raw lumps of meat redden and whiten as the light drifts over and away from them; the salesmen cry their wares. The shops blaze with light, displaying their cheap clothes and cheap furniture and clusters of cheap boots. Some of the women are doing their Saturday night's shopping, but for the most part it is a holiday night, and the people swarm in the streets, some in their working clothes, some in the finery which they will put on to-morrow for their Sunday afternoon walk in the Park; in their faces, their movements, there is that unenjoying hilarity which the end of the week's work, the night, the week's wages, the sort of street fair at which one can buy things to eat and to put on, bring out in people who seem to live for the most part with preoccupied indifference.

As I walk to and fro in Edgware Road, I cannot help sometimes wondering why these people exist, why they take the trouble to go on existing. Watch their faces, and you will see in them a listlessness, a hard unconcern, a failure to be interested, which speaks equally

in the roving eyes of the man who stands smoking at the curbstone with his hands in his pockets, and in the puckered cheeks of the woman doing her shopping, and in the noisy laugh of the youth leaning against the wall, and in the gray, narrow face of the child whose thin legs are too tired to dance when the barrel-organ plays jigs. Whenever anything happens in the streets there is a crowd at once, and this crowd is made up of people who have no pleasures and no interests of their own to attend to, and to whom any variety is welcome in the tedium of their lives. In all these faces you will see no beauty, and you will see no beauty in the clothes they wear, or in their attitudes in rest or movement, or in their voices when they speak. They are human beings to whom nature has given no grace or charm, whom life has made vulgar, and for whom circumstances have left no escape from themselves. In the climate of England, in the atmosphere of London, on these pavements of Edgware Road, there is no way of getting any simple happiness out of natural things, and they have lost the capacity for accepting natural pleasures graciously, if such came to them. Crawling between heaven and earth thus miserably, they

have never known what makes existence a practicable art or a tolerable spectacle, and they have infinitely less sense of the mere abstract human significance of life than the facchino who lies, a long blue streak in the sun, on the Zattere at Venice, or the girl who carries water from the well in an earthen pitcher, balancing it on her head, in any Spanish street.

Or, instead of turning to human beings, in some more favorable part of the world, go to the Zoological Gardens and look at the beasts there. The conditions of existence are, perhaps, slightly worse for the beasts; their cages are narrow, more securely barred; human curiosity is brought to bear upon them with a more public offence. But observe, under all these conditions, the dignity of the beasts, their disdain, their indifference! When the fluttering beribboned, chattering human herd troops past them, pointing at them with shrill laughter, uneasy, pre-occupied, one eye on the beasts and the other on the neighbour's face or frock, they sit there stolidly in their cages, not condescending to notice their unruly critics. When they move, they move with the grace of natural things, made rhythmical with beauty and strong for ravage and swift for flight. They pace to and fro, rubbing

themselves against the bars, restlessly; but they seem all on fire with a life that tingles to the roots of their claws and to the tips of their tails, dilating their nostrils and quivering in little shudders down their smooth flanks. They have found an enemy craftier than they, they have been conquered and carried away captive, and they are full of smouldering rage. But with the loss of liberty they have lost nothing of themselves; the soul of their flesh is uncontaminated by humiliation. They pass a mournful existence nobly, each after his kind, in loneliness or in unwilling companionship; their eyes look past us without seeing us; we have no power over their concentration within the muscles of their vivid limbs or within the coils of their subtle bodies.

Humanity, at the best, has much to be ashamed of, physically, beside the supreme physical perfection of the panther or the snake. All of us look poor enough creatures as we come away from their cages. But think now of these men and women whom we have seen swarming in Edgware Road, of their vulgarity, their abjectness of attitude toward life, their ugliness, dirt, insolence, their loud laughter. All the animals except man have too much

dignity to laugh; only man found out the way to escape the direct force of things by attaching a critical sense, or a sense of relief, to a sound which is neither a cackle nor a whinny, but which has something of those two inarticulate voices of nature. As I passed through the Saturday night crowd lately, between two opposing currents of evil smells, I overheard a man who was lurching along the pavement say in contemptuous comment: "Twelve o'clock! we may be all dead by twelve o'clock!" He seemed to sum up the philosophy of that crowd, its listlessness, its hard unconcern, its failure to be interested. Nothing matters, he seemed to say for them; let us drag out our time until the time is over, and the sooner it is over the better.

Life in great cities dishumanizes humanity; it envelops the rich in multitudes of clogging, costly trifles, and cakes the poor about with ignoble dirt and the cares of unfruitful labour. Go into the country, where progress and machines and other gifts of the twentieth century have not wholly taken away the peasant's hand from the spade and plough, or to any fishing village on the coast, and you will see that poverty, even in England, can find some natural delights in natural

things. You will find, often enough, that very English quality of vulgarity in the peasant who lives inland; only the sea seems to cleanse vulgarity out of the English peasant, and to brace him into a really simple and refined dignity. And, after all, though the labourer who turns the soil is in unceasing contact with nature, he has not that sting of danger to waken him and cultivate his senses which is never absent for long from the life of the fisherman. People who cast their nets into the sea, on the hazard of that more uncertain harvest, have a gravity, a finished self-reliance, a kind of philosophy of their own. Their eyes and hands are trained to fineness and strength, they learn to know the winds and clouds, and they measure their wits against them, risking their lives on the surety of their calculations. The constant neighbourhood of death gives life a keener savour, they have no certainty of ever opening again the door which they close behind them as they go out to launch their boats under the stars. Tossing between a naked sea and a naked sky all night long, they have leisure for many dreams, and thoughts come into their heads which never trouble the people who live in streets. They have all the visible horizon for their own.

And the sea washes clean. In the steep Cornish village that I know best, I see, whenever I go out, bright flowers in front of white cottages, a cow's head laid quietly over a stone hedge, looking down on the road, the brown harvest in the fields that stretch away beyond the trees to the edge of the cliff, and then, further on towards the sky, the blue glitter of the sea, shining under sunlight, with great hills and palaces of white clouds, rising up from the water as from a solid foundation. The sea is always at the road's end, and there is always a wind from the sea, coming singing up the long street from the harbour, and shouting across the fields and whistling in the lanes. Life itself seems to come freshly into one's blood, as if life were not only a going on with one's habits and occupations, but itself meant something, actually existed. Everyone I meet on the road speaks to me as I pass; their faces and their voices are cheerful; they have no curiosity, but they are ready to welcome a stranger as if he were someone they knew already. Time seems to pass easily, in each day's space between sea and sky; the day has no tedium for them; and they need go no further than to the harbour or the farm for enough interest to

fill out all the hours of the day. They have room to live, air to breathe; beauty is natural to everything about them. The dates in their churchyards tell you how long they have the patience to go on living.

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